DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 078 456 CS 500 298

AUTHOR Bailey, Dennis L.
TITLE Ramist Rhetoric and the Puritan Dilemma.
PUB DATE Apr 73
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Speech Assn. (Minneapolis, April 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Colonial History (United States); *Expository Writing; *Language Styles; Language Usage; *Literary Styles; *Persuasive Discourse; Public Speaking; Puritans; *Rhetoric
IDENTIFIERS *Ramus (Peter)

ABSTRACT

The chief insistence of the educational reform that Peter Ramus initiated in the sixteenth century in England was that the liberal arts should exist as separate and distinct disciplines, divided from one another. He split the old rhetorical laws to avoid duplication between dialectic and rhetoric and thus influenced the style of preaching found in the Puritan churches in England and New England, giving impetus to plainness and simplicity of expression in public discourse. Ramus's influence in Puritan discourse was dominant during the early years of New England settlement but began to decline from 1660 onward, several decades before the period others have suggested. Expository discourse reflecting his influence prevailed in the speaking of the first settlers, but the imprecatory style attained growing significance during the last decades of the seventeenth century. (RN)

RAMIST RHETORIC AND THE PURITAN DILEMMA

A Paper Presented at the

Central States Speech Association Conference

Minneapolis, Minnesota

Hotel Leamington

April 7, 1973

Dennis L. Bailey

Department of Speech and Dramatic Art

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas

RAMIST RHETORIC AND THE PURITAN DILEMMA

Beginning with his Training in Dialectic, published in 1543, Peter Ramus inaugurated an educational reform at the University of Paris which had far-reaching influence in England. The chief insistence of his reform was that the liberal arts should exist as separate and independent disciplines, rigidly defined and jealously divided from one another. To avoid any hint of duplication between the disciplines of dialectic and rhetoric, Ramus broke apart the ancient rhetorical canon, assigning invention and arrangement to dialectic. In 1543, Ramus announced that his colleague, Omar Talon, would subsequently provide a complimentary treatment of rhetoric. Talon responded in 1545 with Training in Oratory, a treatise which in its handling of rhetoric revealed Talon's complete dedication to Ramus.[1]

Evidence of the influence these works had in England is found in the "plain style" of Puritan preaching, which was nurtured by non-conformist lecturers at Cambridge and practiced by clergymen in both England and New England. Plainness or simplicity of expression had periodically surfaced since antiquity as a desirable goal in rhetoric, but Ramus gave it an impetus it had not received since the Patristic Era. Walter Ong astutely observes that the plain style was not prescribed by Ramist rhetoric, but that it was made inevitable by the whole mental setting which constitutes Ramism.[2]

Students of colonial discourse have considered Ramism critical in understanding the theory behind Puritan speaking. "During the first century of American colonization," says Warren Guthrie, "Peter Ramus seemed almost to dominate the thinking of the colonists."[3] Perry Miller suggests that "the dominant rhetorical system in the New England colonies . . . was definitely the Ramist" system.[4] Moreover, Guthrie concludes that the period of Ramist rhetoric in America continued until about 1730, several decades after Wilbur Samuel Howell marks its decline in England.[5]

However, after a study of public discourse from the Bay Colony, I have observed that Ramus' influence, while dominant during the early years of settlement, experienced a rapid and significant decline among clergymen of the second and third generations. This marks the point of decline from 1660 onward, some 70 years earlier than Guthrie and others have suggested. I shall try to provide some observations about the messages which lead me to this conclusion. My purpose here is to deduce from rhetorical practice implications about rhetorical theory.

After examining some 260 seventeenth-century publications, which represent individual sermons as well as collections,[6] I have identified three general types, kinds, or genres of public discourse--expository, imprecatory, and hortatory. For present purposes, I am concerned with only the expository and imprecatory genres, which represent on a hypothetical continuum the generic extremes.[7]

The Ramist perspective brought about an expository discourse which reflects extraordinary concern for dichotomous patterns of analysis. Meriting repute for an unusually long sequence

of addresses, Samuel Willard's Mercy-Magnified demonstrates the inconsequential continuity of thought such patterns produced.[8] In 28 sermons filling a total of 391 pages, Willard journeys through a mere 22 verses (Luke 15:11-32) which tell the Parable of the Prodigal Son. While the narrative of biblical events produces a heightening drama over the whole series, an aroused sense of anticipation quickly dissipates when looking at any one sermon. Individual sermons possess little organic unity. One message often runs into another with only arbitrarily marked divisions between them.

In the expository genre, another Ramist affinity is amplification through definition. In 1652, Richard Mather published a sermon based on a text from Genesis.[9] Not only in the opening but also when amplifying the doctrine, Mather employs definitions extensively. His dependence on definition, which produces the stylistic equations so common in expository discourse, is exemplified in his remarks on justification. "Justification is a judiciary act," he says; "it is opposed to condemn . . . and so it differs from sanctification. . . ."[10] Mather is declarative in language and thinks himself unequivocal, but circumlocations easily dissipate the impact of his thought. He repeats key equations to reinforce the message and enhance its recall. "A man cannot justifie himself," he says. "Hence it followeth, that justification once obteyned, can not be lost. . . . Man once justified shall never loose his justified estate, nor fall from it."[11] Mather clenches the thought with words which, in a rhythm of their own, impart a quiet confidence to the doctrine of election. In

Ramist fashion, his tone is objective, his development abstract, and his style diffused and repetitious. His arrows of truth are aimed at the mind and not the heart.

In contrast, the referential nature of imprecatory discourse is apparent, for example, when Cotton Mather seized a rare opportunity, "upon the news of an invasion by bloody Indians and Frenchmen," to address himself to immediate civil and social problems. In this sermon, entitled The Present State of New England, and delivered in 1690, he declares the needs and advantages of a public spirit in every man, "especially, at such a time as this."[12]

Since the speech lacks the dichotomies or balanced divisions so characteristic of Ramist rhetoric, it takes on an updated appearance of continuous, sequential discourse. As is true of other imprecatory speeches, Mather's language reflects a low-level abstraction and vehemency of style seldom found in expository discourse. This quality is apparent, for example, when he tells of Haman's anger after Mordecai refused to bow. "Now the bloody Revenge of this Hellish Monster," says Mather, "prompted him to pursue . . . the utter Desolation and Extirpation, of the whole Nation Mordecai was of: one Lark will not fill the belly of such a Vulture."[13]

The sermon's remaining parts function to develop a unity among listeners who, in turn, will rally to the defense of neighboring settlers. The speaker examines the sin that would cause failure, and directs an appeal to his listeners for self-examination. Each responds to the needs of God's people, or else he is

the most contemptuous of hellhounds. Mather identifies this sin as personal selfishness. "Tho' [men of private spirit] can spend many Pounds in a year upon a pernicious Lust," he declares, "they would not care tho' the House of their Neighbours were Burnt, if their own Apples might be Roasted at the Flame."[14]

In a funeral sermon for an eighteen-year-old youth, Samuel Wakeman demonstrates the astonishing directness of imprecatory discourse.[15] The text, from Ecclesiastes 12:1, "Remember now thy Creator in the dayes of thy youth," was suggested by the deceased himself. Wakeman's straightforward approach to an audience becomes vivid when he asks, "Art thou Fifteen, Sixteen, Eighteen years old? is it too great an adventure, measuring thy Life by thy Image and Constitution . . . to run hazard of thy Hopes for Heaven upon? The Example that is before thee in this young man (whom Death scarce suffered to be called a man) may convince thee of the contrary. O who would not be always ready, when his summones are so exceeding uncertain."[16]

But a brief moment later, Wakeman closes the address in a manner that illustrates the bolting vehemency of style in imprecatory discourse. "O Sirs," he exclaims, "Dying times are Trying times; to die causlesly confidently I am afraid is too common, but to die groundedly comfortably is a great work. O do, do thorough what thou hast to do, man, when Death comes thou wilt not finde it is too well done."[17] The initial rhyme, the alliteration, the thumping accents of stress-crowded rhythm, and repetious exclamations all combine to batter the wits and impart a swelling sense of urgency to the sermon. Such instinctive expressions

combined with the visceral thrust of garish examples, produce a spirited response within a unified audience.

After examining these sermons from a generic perspective, I have observed that the expository genre clearly reflects tenets of Ramist rhetoric. The tone one finds in these sermons is that of a speaker who establishes an objective, antiseptic relationship with his subject. The speaker strives to make his message remembered, and the speech is often characterized by persistent repetition at points of division rather than by sequences of argument. The message can usually be trimmed to order, more or less casually, without any revision of its overall internal organization. It is frequently given in series. Its style is diffused, usually in the manner of an equation and a series of parallel terms, often exhibiting some common element of form. The structure is ordinarily apparent, or even bold. The message is developed at a high level of abstraction, primarily through textual exegesis and with a thorough biblical orientation. The speech stands forth on its own in an immediate cultural vacuum. It is distinctively contextual, self-enclosed, non-referential, and intramural. The overall rhetorical effect is that a subject be regarded a certain way. The speech itself tends to be functional in nature, didactic, instructive, informative. This discourse represents a genre in which the Ramist affinity for rational analysis prevails to the neglect of all else.

In comparison, the imprecatory genre is far removed from the austerity of expository discourse, and the difference suggests that Ramist values have lost their hold on colonial speakers.

Within the imprecatory genre, the speaker does not seek so much to induce anyone to remember the parts of his message as to invoke concurrence. The genre reveals a maximum effort to produce belief, having a persuasive goal, albeit a uniquely conceived one. The overall rhetorical effect is that the listener regard himself in a certain way. Through this intensified self-awareness, the speech creates a mental disposition aimed at leading the hearer kinetically toward a response.

In contrast to expository discourse, where the speaker submits himself more to the dictates of his subject, the imprecatory speaker exerts greater control over his materials. The speech is primarily subjective in tone, and possesses greater concreteness in development through the use of comparisons and examples, especially from contemporary or familiar settings, and through less use of allegory. Though offering a reasoned pattern of th ht, imprecatory discourse moves through inferential immediacy and emotional intensity to create a climax. Employing stimulating suspensions with prominent subordinating constructions, the style creates a constant sense of progress and climax. Climax is further enhanced through visceral interjections and exclamations. With an unusual degree of speaker involvement, the address reveals a highly self-conscious performance. Imprecatory discourse is unspoiled from the earlier evidences of dialecticism, and Ramist rhetoric proves increasingly inadequate in describing the theoretical assumptions characterizing it.

My suspicion that Ramus' influence waned earlier than some have believed is based on the observation that expository discourse

prevails in the speaking of the first settlers, and that the imprecatory genre, which reveals diminishing Ramist influence, evolves as an increasingly prominent type of discourse during subsequent decades.[18] This does not mean that expository discourse does not exist among later generations--it does exist--but the imprecatory genre acquires growing significance as the last decades of the seventeenth century pass. During this later period, most speeches which found their way into print fall outside the realm of expository discourse and in the province of either a hortatory or imprecatory genre.

Once the social climate of the first generation changed, colonial orators faced the dilemma of maintaining loyalty to the rhetorical forms of John Cotton and Richard Mather, or else altering the nature of their discourse to fit contemporary audiences.[19] Remaining loyal to the rhetorical values of the first settlers implied a decline in the ministers' effectiveness and relevance among subsequent generations. To turn instead to the spirited forms of persuasive discourse implied a continual role in molding the social and intellectual consciousness of New England. To the rhetor who found himself in the context of a changing social order, the Ramist perspective to rhetoric apparently lacked fruitfulness.

NOTES

[1] Walter J. Ong, Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 270; Petri Rami Veromandui Dialecticae institutiones, ad celeberrimam et illustrissimam Lutetiae Parisiorum Academiam (Parisiis: Iacobus Bogardus, 1543); Audimari Talaei Veromandui Institutiones oratoriae, ad celeberrimam et illustrissimam Lutetiae Parisiorum Academiam (Parisiis: Iacobus Bogardus, 1545). Later editions of the two works by Ramus and Talon are available in University Microfilm's British and Continental Rhetoric and Elocution Series. For information about other editions and versions, see Ong's Ramus and Talon Inventory (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958).

[2] Ong, Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue, p. 285.

[3] Warren Guthrie, "Rhetorical Theory in Colonial America," in History of Speech Education in America: Background Studies, ed., Karl R. Wallace (New York: Appleton, Century, Croft, 1954), p. 48.

[4] Perry Miller, The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century, I (Boston: Beacon, 1961), 313.

[5] Guthrie, pp. 48-49; Wilbur Samuel Howell, "Ramus and English Rhetoric: 1574-1681," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 37 (1951), 299-310; and Howell, Logic and Rhetoric in England, 1500-1700 (New York: Russell & Russell, 1961), p. 280.

[6] A convenient description of these addresses can be found in Robert M. Benton, "An Annotated Check List of Puritan Sermons Published in America before 1700," Bulletin of the New York Public Library, 74 (1970), 286-337.

[7] A complete description of these genres is available in my "Rhetorical Genres in Early American Public Address, 1652-1700," Diss. Univ. of Oklahoma 1971, pp. 75-123.

[8] Mercy-Magnified on a Penitent Prodigal (Boston: Samuel Green, 1684).

[9] Richard Mather, The Summe of Certain Sermons (Boston: Samuel Green, 1652).

[10] Richard Mather, p. 6.

[11] Richard Mather, p. 7.

[12] Cotton Mather, The Present State of New England (Cambridge, Mass.: Samuel Green, 1690), p. 1.

[13] Cotton Mather, p. 4.

[14] Cotton Mather, pp. 22-23.

15 Samuel Wakeman, A Young Man's Legacy to the Rising Generation (Cambridge, Mass.: Marmaduke Johnson, 1673), p. 41.

16 Wakeman, p. 44.

17 Wakeman, p. 45.

18 Relevant to this conclusion is Eugene E. White's recent comment that "Puritans were not the thoroughgoing Ramists that Perry Miller and Wilbur Howell have contended." White promises to develop his statement in a book now in preparation. See his Puritan Rhetoric: The Issues of Emotion in Religion (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), p. 17.

19 The changing social context faced by ministers is well described in David D. Hall's The Faithful Shepherd: A History of the New England Ministry in the Seventeenth Century (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1972).